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ABSTRACT

Issues that concern a culture are frequently reflected in the myths or stories that it tells. Education of its children frequently has caused discussion and debate in American society on topics such as "keeping up" with the Russians or whether test scores are higher or lower than five or ten years ago. Since television has become an influential medium, it is possible to discern trends in education by analyzing television shows, from 1950 to the present, that deal with teachers and students. Early television shows, such as "Leave It to Beaver" and "Our Miss Brooks," show the teacher as an authority figure, or the teacher as hero. Later television shows, such as "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" and "Sesame Street," accent the student's role as learner, or the student as hero. Finally, more recent shows, such as "The Paper Chase" or "Fame," portray students and teachers on nearly equal terms, or student as hero, teacher as hero. Although debates on competing educational philosophies may never be completely resolved, insight into the dilemmas they pose may be gained from such an analysis. (DF)

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Student as Hero, Teacher as Hero:

A Mythic Analysis of the Portrayal of Selected Educational Issues In American Popular Culture

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The author discusses, from a mythic perspective, the portrayal of selected educational issues in American popular culture. Specifically, the dynamics of the "teacher-centered" v. "student-centered" and "process" v. "product" philosophical debates are studied in a survey of three decades of network television programming. A shift from an early emphasis on an authoritarian posture of instructors to increasing participation and responsibility of students is traced. The trend of some recent programs to embrace both teacher and student prominence is cast as a synthesis of "mythic contraries."

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How shall we educate our children? This is one of those vague, general questions that all societies have pondered, discussed, and argued about yet never completely resolved. Still, it is an important question that must be worked through even if it is never settled. The education of its children is one of the unanswered--and, perhaps unanswerable--questions that societies live with, feel ambivalently noble and uncomfortable with, and tell stories about. Questions of self-definition and learning, like those about life, death, pain, courage, and war are all subject to the stories and myths of a culture.

Questions like these prompt societies to turn to myth. The stories a culture tells provide ways for its members to resolve or at least come to terms with, issues that tend to confound or baffle them. Usually by way of some kind of story, myths suggest concrete ways of proceeding for people who are unsure of how to proceed. A society's repository of myths can be drawn from to provide patterns that match a current life condition. For example, the myth of Paul Bunyan encouraged early settlers in the Midwest that the wilderness was indeed conquerable. Myths of heroes make concrete the possibility of accomplishing a task against seemingly insurmountable odds. Myths of explanation such as the Creation myth and the Phoenix myth help humans embrace phenomena that they do not understand. Members of a society have built-in stories and symbols in their heads, told and retold in many ways that can be applied to their questions and problems. That is, myths tend to proceed analogically, matching built-in narratives with concrete situations, rather than proceeding logically, by cause and effect. This mythic mode enables story-tellers in popular culture to reflect the deepest concerns of a society (Gronbeck 21-23).

Education has been and remains such a deep concern. The general public and the press approach the questions of education quite generally, in broad and sometimes even in digital terms:

Is our children's education "good" or "bad"? Are we "keeping up with" the Russians? Are test scores higher or lower than they were five or ten years ago? In contrast, professional educators--in addition to all those who consider more carefully and in greater depth their educational philosophy--address the questions related to education in much more specific terms. They are likely to ask more pointed questions: Are initiatives and most responsibilities in the classroom assumed to be the burden of the teacher or of the student? Is it appropriate to focus on the process undertaken to learn a particular competency, or is it better to concentrate on the product, the result of that process?

How we educate our children is a deep concern, both generally and specifically, in our society. Because a culture turns to myth to work through its most challenging questions, one way to consider the issues involved in education is to turn to popular culture to see what stories have been told about learning: how students are portrayed; how teachers are portrayed; what the power relationships are between students and teachers; what it is that is considered the "business" of students and teachers; what the "purpose" of education is.

The Portrayal of Education in Popular Culture

Early forms of popular culture did contain some stories about teachers and students: Archie Andrews and Mr. Weatherbee in the comics; Constance Brooks and Walter Denton on radio; Mr. Chips from our memory of the novel and film. But more than any other medium of popular culture, issues in American education are reflected in stories we have watched on our television screens. The questions we ask as a society about how to educate our children and those we specifically ask as professionals have been worked through, mythically, by teachers like Frances Horwich (Ding Dong School, 1951-1956), Lydia Grant and Benjamin

Shorofsky (Fame, 1982-), Lucas Tanner (Lucas Tanner, 1974-75), John Novak (Mr. Novak, 1963-65), Robinson J. Peepers (Mr. Peepers, 1952-55), Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, 1967-), Constance Brooks (Our Miss Brooks, 1952-56), Charles Kingsfield (The Paper Chase, 1978-79), Pete Dixon (Room 222, 1969-74), Gabe Kotter (Welcome Back, Kotter, 1975-79), and Ken Reeves (The White Shadow, 1978-81). They have been responded to (obeyed, encountered, smarted-off to, engaged, and enlightened) by students like Bruno Martelli, Leroy Johnson, and Coco Hernandez (Fame), Walter Denton (Our Miss Brooks), James T. Hart (The Paper Chase), Jaytee and Cindy (Lucas Tanner), Richie and Pam (Room 222), and Vinnie Barbarino (Welcome Back, Kotter). By observing how these students and teachers learn and teach and by observing what they consider to be important, we as students and teachers are provided suggested patterns for our learning and teaching. Law students and prospective law students have stories about James Hart to reflect upon when considering the seemingly insurmountable task of learning the law. Teachers not knowing how to respond to a particular problem with a student can remember and draw from stories about Pete Dixon, Lydia Grant, Gabe Kotter, or Ken Reeves.

Myth and Television

This mythic reservoir from which students and teachers can draw is particularly suited for the medium of television. TV shares many of the characteristics of myth and is its natural ally, a hospitable medium for transmitting the mythical stories of a culture. Myths are stories, and most of television's content is in story form (even and perhaps especially the news). Myths are usually transmitted orally and tend to penetrate a culture, unlike printed fables which are stored away. That is, myths are pervasive, like television, always accessible to those who live in a culture. Mythic stories are told in a variety of

ways with meanings established through the relationships of ideas and images, rather than the linear progression depended on by print. Bruce Gronbeck has explained the TV-Myth relationship in depth:

> (T)elevision has the power to generate and reinforce . . . social norms. . . . (T)elevision programs often have a strongly mythic structure. . . . (A) myth is a narrative that uses past, present, or future heroes--characters who are larger than life--to preach social-moral lessons that tell us where we came from, who we are as a people, and what our destiny is if we act courageously. . . . Some of these heroes are fictional and some are not, some are living and some are dead, but they all have one thing in common: they are given to us via television in forms that connect their thinking and actions to fundamental, timeless myths--myths of creation, of virtuous action, of destiny. Television programs, in many ways, have become America's counterpart to Aesop and his fables, the Grimm Brothers and their fairy tales, Mother Goose and her rhymes, and, for some, the Bible and its prophets. (5-6)

Purpose

Drawing from this relationship between myth and television, my purpose in the remainder of this paper is to show how the "heroes" and "heroines" of American television shows about education have lived through, in the stories we are told, some of those issues which we as professional educators have considered. It will become evident that popular culture is both a repository and a provider of ways to engage these basic issues. And that popular culture provides ways of looking at ourselves and a record of our concerns, a focus for talking and thinking about educational issues.

What, specifically, has television provided? Throughout all of its decades, there have been programs on American television that have either been set in a school environment or whose characters have had to deal with educational events as an ongoing concern. Some of the issues that are both universal as well as currently topical can be seen as being reflected in American popular culture as mythically portrayed on television.

One of the more common debates is whether a classroom ought to be "teacher-centered" or "student-centered." Another is whether, in communication education--especially writing education--the focus of the classroom ought to be on "process" or "product." In writing, the "product" approach was once the dominant paradigm. Very simply, attention was paid to just that--the product produced by the students in its finished form. Evaluation came as letter grades, correction of mechanics, and perhaps comments on how well the writing conformed to a prescription or a formula provided by a text or an instructor. The "product" approach also connotes a teacher-centered classroom and is associated with grade-consciousness and anxieties over "correct-ness." It is the teacher who provides the formula for the product and who grades it. Writing students once had little opportunity to use writing as parallel to their emerging cognitive development, that is, to move from expressive, reflexive writing to the extensive, or public writing. A variety of educational theorists have written about these developmental processes.[1] Maxine Hairston has pointed out that writing has been moving to a new paradigm, with an emphasis on the "process" as more inclusive of what goes on in developing a piece of writing and as more reflective of cognitive development.

As I have suggested in an earlier work, a process option in speech pedagogy could take on the same characteristics as a process option in writing: student-centered classrooms, emphasis on invention, workshopping various parts of speeches in small groups before the speech is given, discussion, writing, and

reflection about the speech after it is finished, so that the learning of strategies is transferred to the student's growing repertoire of speaking strategies.

Issues that are dealt with by a culture can be found in the stories that it tells. Educational issues of student-centered and teacher-centered classrooms and of "process" vs. "product" are indeed reflected in stories about education--about students, teachers, and learning. If one considers the programs that portray education in some way broadcast from 1950 through 1970, and compare them with the span from 1960 through the present, one can discern a shift analogous to some of the trends in education itself. Specifically, earlier programs reflect a more teacher-centered, result-conscious attitude among those students, teachers, and parents that are involved. Later shows, on the other hand, show students taking more and more of a part, as well as more responsiblity, for their own education.

Teacher as Hero

Consider the pre-1950 to 1970 stories and symbols portrayed. Frances Horwich, fondly known as "Miss Frances" of Ding Dong School, brought forth images of many teachers, whose ringing of the school bell reflected this teacher-heroine's benevolent-though-authoritarian manner. (Also, she usually followed the day's lesson with quasi-moral advice.) The relationship of teacher to student was that of leader to led (with the school bell conjuring semiotically connotations of Pavlovian psychology). Even Mr. Peepers and Miss Brooks, although often the target of humor, had the last word. There was no question in these shows about who was in charge. Constance Brooks's shrill, commanding voice and Bob Peeper's proxemically commanding position behind his science teacher's desk established authority. Beaver Cleaver (whose exploits were not exclusively classroom dominated, but who nevertheless had school on his mind frequently) had teachers who

were clearly authoritarian, and an unquestioning respect for them was reinforced by Beaver's mom and dad. It was wrong for Theodore Cleaver or Wally Denton to directly challenge their teachers. Parents and indeed others in the neighborhood and community reinforced the dominant relationship between these early teachers and their students.

During the more progressive times of the 1960's, teachers portrayed on television began to yield some of their power. They tried to become allies of their students, but at the same time retained ultimate control. John Novak and Pete Dixon helped students with both personal and academic problems. These teachers approached schoolwork as something more than the finished themes that were "due today" and summarily handed back. This contrasted somewhat with earlier teachers whom we never saw providing response to students as they were working on various stages of their tasks. Their attitude had seemed to be, assign and judge. Teachers on television in the 60's were much more likely to be seen providing help along the way. However, they lacked an important element of the "process" approach. They did little to encourage the participation of the students in classroom activities. That is, although they engaged students, and responded somewhat to learning as a process, it was still the teacher who planned, decided, conducted, and judged the class activities. Thus, student-centeredness and participation, both important characteristics of the "process" approach were lacking in these retellings of the myth of "teacher-as-hero." In these 50's and 60's shows, it was still the teacher's word that counted the most. In the early version of this myth (1950-1960), it was images like Beaver's report card, his exam, and his paper that really counted. Students during this period were expected to focus on the products of their work and to be anxious about them. Then, student initiative in some of the transition programs in the 60's was permitted by benevolent teachers whose strong personalities still dominated the classroom.

Student as Hero

A very high-quality program on NBC in the fall of 1961 serves as a precursor to a portrayal of "student-as-hero." It is perhaps a keynote of sorts for a competing myth to that of the teacher-dominated classroom. In this program, It's a Man's World, two students, Wes and Tom-Tom, each in his own way, found successful learning styles by depending on their own interests. Wes, the diligent one, was motivated to enter and succeed in law school, and in this quest is shown as struggling against, and succeeding in spite of, great odds. Tom-Tom, the more reflexive learner, would spend hours on his houseboat, idly reading such texts as Suzuki's Zen Budhism. Quick to help others, to rise to the occasion, to quench emergencies based on his self-reliance, this symbol of the American scholar looking to self as guide provided a pattern for viewers to have faith in learning by doing, by participating. Whichever style chosen--Wes, the striver, or Tom-Tom, the diverger--a new portrayal of education was previewed in this 1961 program, one that featured emphasis on the student and the importance of participation. The inspiration for these learners came not from the insistence or authority of the teacher but rather from the goal or inclination to learn. Student choice became a factor in the mythic relationships.

So, a competing myth was premiered, one in which the hero of the myth of the story of learning did not inherently need to be the teacher. This program demonstrated that a motivated learner has a quest, a story, also.

In the shows of the 60's, we see the student becoming a viable hero in a story about learning. A teacher can be replaced in the mythic response to the question "How shall we educate our children?" Spanning both periods--the teacher-dominated 50's and the student-emerging 60's--is Fred Rogers, better known as Mr. Rogers. With his laid-back, non-authoritarian, casual, and gentle manner, this "teacher as yielding hero" engages his

TV students and sometimes their studio surrogates in patient, respectful tones, showing them how things work, asking questions, being both benevolent teacher and receptive listener. Whether he is showing the process of an Indian dance, how to help with cooking lunch, or telling a fable with a point, the explanation of a skill or a phenomena as a process seems to come quite naturally to this former Presbyterian minister. He checks in with students at each step of the way, asking if they understand and whether they have questions or comments. Mr. Rogers welcomes student as hero, yielding the authority to the student with patience and respect. Through myth, the story of this teacher can serve as the story of all teachers.

Later PBS shows expanded this trend to emphasis on student and the importance of participation, both important characteristics of the process approach. Both Sesame Street (1969-) and Zoom (1972-1979) show students involved at various stages of many processes, such as flying a hang glider, working on a farm, figuring out a word game, or talking about something well learned. Zoom was students teaching each other: "Hey, let's do this!" "Help me figure this out." "I'm getting tired of this; let's do something else." This show was all students--making individual and group learning decisions. It was as if they were saying to us, "I learn, therefore, I am." This is consistent with their opening introductory number which showed several students marchinng and dancing up to the the camera's face and announcing, with the self-esteem that enhances all learning, their names: Hi, I'm Bobby! I'm Jane! I'm Roger! I'm Betty! The relationship in this telling of the story of learning, now cast as student-as-hero, was learner to each other and to the subjects of curiosity and inclination. Similarly Sesame Street is participation, calling for even the home audience to directly participate in the word and picture activities. Learning as a resident of Sesame Street means that learning is something that you do, not something that you watch, and especially not something that someone else does

to you! TV, as McLuhan told us again and again, is a participatory medium by its very nature, and these two programs used that potential strength, the inherent characteristic of participation, to enhance the learning process. These programs provided built-in symbols and stories, recurring versions, of student as doer, and the stories trace that doing in all parts of an activity. The students on Zoom, actively engaged in the learning process, are very unlike the image of Beaver Cleaver skulking home with report card in hand, carrying a "scarlet letter" from authority to authority.

Thus, the portrayal of students and teachers, and of the learning process itself, switched from the authoritarian postures of Miss Frances, Mr. Peepers, and Miss Brooks to the assertiveness of students Wes and Tom-Tom, of the Zoom kids, and was taken up later by the likes of Leroy Johnson, Vinnie Barbarino, and James T. Hart.

Student as Hero, Teacher as Hero

Like all theses and antitheses, the competing mythic portrayals of students and teachers described in this paper so far eventually approach a synthesis. It is possible that some recent myth-providing programs about education can begin to not only add to the understanding of, but also provide a resolution for, the product v. process and teacher-centered v. student-centered philosophical discussions. If they do not provide a resolution, they at least will have offered a pattern for viewers showing that classroom tensions can be worked through and lived through, that learning can and does occur.

As perhaps a humorous version of The Paper Chase, both students and teacher in Welcome Back, Kotter held a turbulent classroom together on the basis of mutual respect. A similar student-teacher relationship, verging close to one of equality, is Fame which, though very much emphasizing the entire range of

learning phases needed by the young artists it portrays, shows teacher as representative of the expert rather than of authority. As trusted adult. Lydia Grant and Benjamin Shorofsky are indeed authoritarian-like in their approach to dealing with the students at the School of the Performing Arts, but their authority is clearly not based on their arbitrary, designated authority as teacher, but rather on their earned respect from peers and students as experts in their fields. Too often in a regular classroom, the teacher claims authority simply because s/he is appointed as the teacher. Not because s/he is an author.

Perhaps the story of first-year law student James T. Hart's quest on the Paper Chase is the contemporary version of the student-as-hero myth which can also begin to provide a synthesis of process and product, of student-as-hero and of teacher-as-hero. In this program, Hart must struggle with every phase of the process of arguing the law: gathering raw material for research, drawing on self for expression and values, the need for arranging argument coherently, the consideration of adapting to a very special audience, and holding in mind, during this planning, what has worked before with his audience. Hart needed to learn from previous feedback. He makes concrete the need to learn to communicate by grappling with all phases of the communication process: invention, coherence/arrangement, expression, adaptation to a specialized audience--and responding again to responses received.

At the same time, the story of law-student Hart teaches that there is a special moment of decision, a special response, when Kingsfield, who retrieves "teacher-as-hero" from behind a new version of Mr. Peepers' old desk, it would seem reacts to the argumentative product Hart has decided upon. Thus, this special program retells the story of learning in a way that embraces the contraries between student and teacher dominance, and between product and process philosophies.

The meeting of Hart and Kingsfield in one program represents one telling of a juxtaposition of two competing strands in the stories we tell about learning: student as hero, teacher as hero. These competing philosophies may never be resolved, but with the assistance of popular culture, and the stories we find there, we can see such conflicts being worked through. By reflecting upon these programs, we can "embrace the contraries" more easily.

Note

[1] For a useful sampling, see Britton, Bruner, Elbow (WWP). Flower and Hayes, Moffett, Perl, and Vygotsky.

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